

The Author of the *Precious Garland*—
Nagarjuna

Nagarjuna is widely considered to be one of the most important Buddhist philosophers and is often referred to as the "Second Buddha".

There are many different biographies of him: Indian biographies, Tibetan biographies, and Chinese biographies.

Nagarjuna was born at a time when the teachings of the Universal Vehicle were (with a few exceptions) no longer available in the human realm, and he is perhaps best known for reintroducing these teachings.

When the Buddha turned the wheel of Dharma, he gave teachings on the Universal Vehicle to selected disciples, many of whom were bodhisattvas of the celestial realm. His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama has remarked several times, in reference to Avalokiteshvara's extensive answer to Shariputra's question in the *Heart Sutra*, that Avalokiteshvara was a celestial being and therefore invisible to ordinary human, so it must have seemed to ordinary humans who were present when the *Heart Sutra* was taught that Shariputra was talking to himself.

Shortly after the passing of the Buddha, the first council was held, at which about 500 arhats gathered to collect the Buddha's teachings. It was presided over by Mahākāśyapa, one of the Buddha's senior disciples, in a cave near Rājagrha (now Rajgir), with the support of King Ajatashatru. Its purpose was to preserve the Buddha's sutras and the monastic discipline or rules (Vinaya). The sutras were recited by Ananda and the Vinaya by Upali. But these were mainly the teachings of the Fundamental Vehicle.

The most important teachings of the Universal Vehicle were the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, which are traditionally said to have disappeared from the human realm after the Buddha's death and were returned 400 years later by Nagarjuna.

Nagarjuna was born into a Brahmin family (according to many sutras, about 400 years after the Buddha's death) in southern India in Vidarbha, a kingdom in present-day Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

His birth and his important contribution to the Buddha-Dharma were predicted by the Buddha in the *Descent into Lanka Sutra* (Skt. *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, Tib. *lan kar*

gshegs pa'i mdo), the *Great Cloud Sutra* (Skt. *mahāmeghasūtra*, Tib. *sprin chen po'i mdo*) and the *Great Drum Sutra* (Skt. *mahābherihāraka parivartasūtra*, Tib. *rnga bo che chen po'i mdo*).

At birth, a fortune-teller predicted that Nagarjuna would live only seven days, but if his parents made offerings to one hundred monks, he could live to be seven years old.

Fearing for his life, his parents sent Nagarjuna at the age of seven to the monastic university of Nalanda in northern India. There, the Buddhist master Saraha told him that if he became a monk and recited the Amitayus mantra, he would live a long life. Nagarjuna did so and entered the monastery, receiving the name "Shrimanta".

At Nalanda, Nagarjuna studied sutra and tantra with Ratnamati and, with Saraha, especially the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* (Tib. *dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i rgyud*). He also learned alchemy from a Brahmin and gained the ability to transform iron into gold. With this ability he was able to feed the Nalanda monks during a famine.

Eventually Nagarjuna became the abbot of Nalanda. There he expelled eight thousand monks who did not properly observe the Vinaya monastic rules of discipline. He also defeated five hundred non-Buddhists in debate.

Two youths who were emanations of the sons of a naga king came to Nalanda. They had the natural fragrance of sandalwood. Nagarjuna asked how this could be, and they confessed who they were. Nagarjuna then asked for sandalwood incense for a statue of Tara and for the nagas' help in building temples. They returned to the naga kingdom and asked their father, who said he could only help if Nagarjuna came to their kingdom to teach them. Nagarjuna went, made many offerings, and taught the nagas.

Nagarjuna knew that the nagas had the *Hundred Thousand Verse Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* (Skt. *satasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, Tib. *shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa stong pa brgya pa*) and requested a copy. When the Buddha had taught the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, the nagas had taken a version of it back to their kingdom for safekeeping.

Nagarjuna brought back the hundred thousand verse version, although the nagas kept the last two chapters to ensure that he would return and continue to teach them. Later, the last two chapters were filled in with the last two chapters of the *Eight Thousand Verse Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* (Skt. *aṣṭasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, Tib. *shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa brgyad stong pa*). This is why the last two chapters of these two texts are the same. Nagarjuna also brought back naga clay and built many temples and stupas with it.

Once when Nagarjuna was teaching the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, six nagas came and formed an umbrella over his head to protect him from the sun. This is why the iconographic representation of Nagarjuna has the six nagas over his head. From this event he got the name “Naga”. And from the fact that his skill in teaching Dharma was straight to the point, like the arrows of the famous archer Arjuna (the name of the hero in the Hindu classic, the *Bhagavad Gita*), he was given the name Arjuna. Thus he became known as “Nagarjuna”.

Nagarjuna later traveled to the Northern Island (or Northern Continent) to teach. On the way he met some children playing in the street. He prophesied that one of them, named Jetaka, would become a king. When Nagarjuna returned from the Northern Island, the boy had indeed grown up to become the king of a large kingdom in southern India. Nagarjuna stayed with him for three years, teaching him, and then spent his last years elsewhere in his kingdom, on Shri Parvata, the holy mountain overlooking present-day Nagarjunakonda.

Nagarjuna wrote the *Precious Garland* for the king. This was the same king to whom Nagarjuna wrote *A Letter to a Friend* (Skt. *suhrillekha*, Tib. *bshes pa'i spring yig*), namely King Udayibhadra (Tib. *bde spyod bzang po*).

Please note that Nagarjuna is referred to as the pioneer or trailblazer of the Universal Vehicle, since he reintroduced the teachings of this vehicle and provided the reasoning for why the Buddha taught it. He is also considered the pioneer of the explicit subject matter of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, which is emptiness, and the pioneer of Madhyamika philosophy.

Although the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* are not more precious than other teachings of the Buddha, they are extremely important because they implicitly teach the grounds and paths, that is, the different levels of mental transformation that

practitioners of the Universal Vehicle must undergo in order to realize their full potential and attain the awakened state of a Buddha.

Explicitly the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* teach the numerous different reasonings that establish the ultimate nature of phenomena or emptiness, which not only Bodhisattvas need to realize to attain the state of a Buddha but also practitioners of the Fundamental Vehicle need to realize to attain self-liberation. Therefore, since the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* teach these two extremely important subject matters they are considered to be one of the most outstanding of the Buddha's teachings.

Based on the profound and extensive subject matter of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, two experiential lineages developed, which were initially transmitted separately: (1) the lineage of the profound view (Tib. *zab mo lta brgyud*) and (2) the lineage of the extensive conduct (Tib. *rgya chen spyod brgyud*).

The Buddha had many great bodhisattva disciples, of whom the principal bodhisattvas were called the “eight great, close sons” (Skt. *aṣṭa mahā upaputra*, Tib. *nye ba'i sras chen brgyad*). These eight were Mañjuśhrī, Avalokiteśvara, Vajrapāṇi, Kṣitigarbha, Nirvāraṇaviṣhkambī, Ākaśagarbha, Maitreya, and Samantabhadra.

Buddha Shakyamuni entrusted the lineage of the profound view to the Bodhisattva Mañjuśhrī and the lineage of the extensive conduct to the Bodhisattva Maitreya, both of whom were celestial beings.

Four hundred years later, Bodhisattva Mañjuśhrī transmitted the lineage of the profound view to Nagarjuna, and nine hundred years later, Bodhisattva Maitreya transmitted the lineage of the extensive conduct to Asanga.

Therefore, Nagarjuna is known as the pioneer of the explicit subject matter of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, which is emptiness, and Asanga is known as the pioneer of the hidden subject matter of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, which is the stages of the paths, because they were the first humans after the Buddha to receive the two lineages and pass them on to other masters of the human realm, so that the two experiential lineages still exist to this day.

Moreover, Nagarjuna is the pioneer of Madhyamika philosophy because he was the first human being to clearly lay out Madhyamika philosophy by distinguishing (based on the Madhyamika assertions) which teachings of the Buddha are to be interpreted and which are definitive.

Similarly, Asanga is the pioneer of Chittamatra philosophy because he was the first human being to clearly lay out Chittamatra philosophy by distinguishing (based on the Chittamatra assertions) which teachings of the Buddha need to be interpreted and which are definitive.

Among the many texts on sutric topics that Nagarjuna wrote are his *Collections of Reasoning* (Skt. *yuktikaya*, Tib. *rigs tshogs*), *Collections of Praises* (Tib. *bstod tshogs*), and *Collections of Advice* (Tib. *gtam tshogs*).

His *Collections of Reasoning* consist of five or six texts, commonly referred to as the *Five or Six Collections of Reasoning of the Middle Way* (Tib. *dbu ma rigs tshogs drug*)

The six texts are:

1. *Fundamental Wisdom* (Skt. *mūlamadhyamakārikā*, Tib. *dbu-ma rtsa-ba shes-rab*)

In 27 chapters and 449 verses it extensively presents the middle way view of emptiness and dependent arising and serves as the foundation of the other five texts.

2. *Sutra Called “Finely Woven”* (Skt. *vaidalyasutra*, Tib. *zhib-mo rnam-‘thag zhes-byab-‘i mdo*)

Refutes the non-buddhist Nyaiyayika’s view of sixteen categories.

3. *Rebuttal of Objections* (Skt. *vigrahavyāvartanī*, Tib. *rtsod-pa zlog-pa*)

Supplement to the first chapter of the *Fundamental Wisdom*: shows that despite their emptiness words, logical reasoning and so forth are effective in establishing reality.

4. *Seventy Verses on Emptiness* (Skt. *shūnyatāsaptati*, Tib. *stong-nyid bdun-bcu-pa*).

Serves as supplement to the seventh chapter of the *Fundamental Wisdom*: composed in response to an argument against the last verse of this chapter.

5. *Sixty Verses of Reasoning* (Skt. *yuktisāstikā*, Tib. *rigs-pa drug-cu-pa*)

Shows that in order to achieve liberation it is necessary to understand the reality of existence and non-existence.

6. *Precious Garland* (Skt. *ratnāvalī*, Tib. *rin-chen phreng-ba*)

In five chapters and 500 verses Nagarjuna explains how to attain well-being within samsara and how to attain liberation and enlightenment.

According to the assertion that there are only *Five Collections of Reasoning of the Middle Way*, the *Precious Garland* is included in Nagarjuna's *Collections of Advice* instead.

Included among his *Collections of Praise* are:

- *Praise to the Dharmadhatu* (Skt. *dharmadhātu stava*, Tib. *chos dbyings bstod pa*)
- *Praise to the Ultimate Truth* (Skt. *paramārtha stava*, Tib. *don dam par bstod pa*)
- *Praise to the Supramundane* (Skt. *lokātīta stava*, Tib. *'jig rten las 'das par bstod pa*)
- *Praise of the Inconceivable* (Skt. *acintyastava*, Tib. *bsam gyis mi khyab par bstod pa*)

Included among his *Collections of Advice* are:

- *Commentary on Bodhichitta* (Skt. *bodhicittavivaraṇa*, Tib. *byang chub sems kyi 'grel ba*)
- *Letter to a Friend* (Skt. *suhrllekha*, Tib. *bshes pa'i spring yig*)
- *Tree of Wisdom* (Skt. *nītiśāstraprajñādānda*, Tib. *lugs kyi bstan bcos shes rab stong po*). (Skt. *janapasanabindu*)
- *A Hundred Wisdoms* (Skt. *prajñāsataka*)
- *Drops for Healing Beings* (Skt. *janapasanabindu*)
- *Compendium of Sutra* (Skt. *sūtrasamuccaya*, Tib. *mdo kun las btus pa*)

This text cites many passages from the Mahayana sutras and demonstrate that Nagarjuna's explanation of emptiness is based on the Buddha's teachings.

Also attributed to Nagarjuna are several commentaries on *The Guhyasamaja Tantra*, including:

- *Abbreviated Means for Actualization* (Skt. *piṇḍikṛta sādhana*, Tib. *sgrub thabs mdor byas*)

- *Method for Meditating on the Generation Stage of the Mahayoga Tantra Guhyasamaja Mixed with Its Textual Sources* (Skt. *srī guhyasamāja mahāyogatantra utpattikrama sādhana sūtra* melāpaka, Tib. *rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i bskyed pa'i rim pa'i bsgom pa'i thabs mdo dang bsres pa*)
- *The Five Stages* (Skt. *pañcakrama*, Tib. *rim pa* Inga pa).

Nagarjuna's most famous disciple was Aryadeva (Tib. *'phags pa lha*), author of *Four Hundred Verses* (Skt. *catuhśatakaśāstra*, Tib. *bzhi brgya pa*) and several commentaries on the Guhyasamaja Tantra.

Since in general, Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland* is considered to be part of the Madhyamika literature it is also referred to as the *Precious Garland of the Middle Way*.

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(MEANING OF THE TITLE)

॥३॥ शुभर्षभान्तमुष्मिकर्षकेदिष्टेष्मुष्मान्तर्षा
In Sanskrit: **rajaparikatha ratnavali**

शुभर्षभान्तमुष्मिकर्षकेदिष्टेष्मुष्मान्तर्षा
In Tibetan: **rgyal po la gtam bya ba rin po che'i phreng ba**

(In English: Precious Garland—Advice to a King)

(TRANSLATOR'S HOMAGE)

शुभर्षभान्तमुष्मिकर्षकेदिष्टेष्मुष्मान्तर्षा
Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

The *Precious Garland* was translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan by the

Indian master Jñānagarbha and the Tibetan Lotsawa Chokro Lui Gyaltsen.

Jñānagarbha (Tib. *ye shes snying po*) was an 8th-century Buddhist master from Nalanda who wrote on the Madhyamaka and Yogacara schools and belongs to Bhāviveka's Svatantrika Madhyamika tradition. He was the teacher and ordination master of Śāntarakṣita. Tibetan sources refer to him, Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla as *rang rgyud shar gsum* meaning the “three eastern Svātantrikas” indicating their origins from Eastern India. He is mostly known for his work *Distinguishing the Two Truths* (Skt. *satyadvayavibhariga*, Tib. *bden gnyis rnam 'byed*).

Chokro Lui Gyaltsen (Tib. *cog ro klu'i rgyal mtshan*) was an early Tibetan translator of great importance and one of the twenty-five disciples of Padmasambhava who recognized him as an incarnate bodhisattva. He worked closely with the Indian masters Vimalamitra, Jñānagarbha, Jinamitra and Surendrabohi. He is vital to the continuation of the Vinaya lineage in Tibet.